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Steven Palagy, Born: Budapest, Hungary in November 4, 1923, Interview: October 16, 2011

Steven was born in 1923 and raised in Budapest, Hungary. He graduated from high school in 1943. Steven's uncle had a chemical business, which was the number two company in Budapest. His mother had a job there as a cashier. The entire family lived off of his uncle's business. Steven worked for another uncle as a salesman. Steven's parents divorced when he was 4 or 5. He remembers when his father put him on his lap in a park and said "Do you know the importance of this day? Today you are 4 years old". His father left his mother when he was young. He came back to see Steven often and take him to the park and other places. He remarried before the war.

In March of 1944, Steven was walking down the street and heard the Germans marching. The governor of Hungary had given notice to Hitler that he didn't want any more Hungarian troops on the Russian front. The governor realized their participation was resulting in the butchering of Hungarian troops (Jews and non-Jews). The Russians outnumbered the Hungarians (a country of 10 million people), yet the Hungarians were being forced to aid the Germans. Within 24 hours of the governor's announcement that Hungary would end participation in the German campaign, the Germans occupied Hungary. Steven was 21 years old at the time.

In the family chemical business, Steven's mother and uncle frequently saw refugees coming from German-occupied Europe, including Poland, Austria and Romania. The refugees had no money. Since Steven's mother was a cashier in the business and responsible for paying the bills, she would give money to the refugees. Steven didn't catch the reality of what was happening. It was hard to understand what it would be like to be a refugee, perhaps because he was trying to push himself away from what was happening. Thinking back, he was actually very lucky because all of these occupations of other countries that took place occurred prior to the occupation of Hungary. Since Hungary was the last country to be occupied, Hitler did not have enough time to really finish his plans there. Steven had heard rumors about Hitler's plans to kill all the Jews but he did not know at the time; he was still hoping for the best.

The Hungarians were already threatened by Jews and their success. When the Germans came to Hungary in March of 1944, they quickly took away licenses from Jews so that they could not conduct any business, such as practicing law or medicine. Steven's family could no longer participate in their business. His uncle paid a straw man under the table to continue the chemical business but he couldn't participate. Steven's other uncle for whom he was working could continue to operate his business because his wife was not Jewish and he kept the business under her name.

Within two to three weeks of the German occupation, there were posters on the street saying that people of Steven's age had to appear for military service. This service was for all men of Steven's age, not just Jews. Steven had to appear in front of a group of military officers and he wanted to get an exemption because he knew it would require leaving the country and would be unpleasant to serve in that time. Steven didn't believe everything he heard at that time, but he heard that they would need to go to Germany. He also heard that they were going to go to death camps. Steven found a doctor who was willing to help and he gave him an injection that caused Steven's knees to be swollen so that he would not be able to serve. The plan did not work. When Steven appeared before the Hungarian military

officials with swollen knees, they decided he was fit for service despite the arthritis that developed. The effect of the injections was supposed to be temporary, but they resulted in a long term effect. Today, Steven has arthritis and has had surgery with artificial implants to reduce the pain.

Steven was enlisted in military service and was sent on a train to a slave labor camp in Hungary, an hour train ride from Budapest. His group was comprised of all Jewish men. They stayed in the barracks of Hungarian soldiers, were fed three times a day, and they were not tortured. They were just doing meaningless work. For example, Steven had to pick up cigarette butts, put them in a container, and when he was finished and presented the container to the sergeant, the sergeant took the container and would spread the cigarette butts out to be picked up again. The Hungarians were not very organized; their main intent was to humiliate and break the spirit of the Jews.

When the rumors began in 1943, prior to the German occupation, some Jews talked about converting, hoping for protection, but this didn't do any good. Steven converted in 1943, mainly for protection. He wanted his high school diploma to show that he converted. The only difference for the Jews who converted was, when they moved into the so-called military service, they wore a yellow arm band (as opposed to a yellow star), and Steven's group received a white arm band. This distinction meant a few more months in Hungary and not in Germany, which probably saved Steven's life. His entire group with white arm bands consisted of Jewish men who had converted.

By this time, Steven knew that everything bad was possible and he didn't dismiss the rumors. There was an incident in the slave labor camp in which he was chopping wood with two others for a general who had his own private house within the military compound. The general came out and saw that they weren't chopping the wood fast enough for him. He took out a whip and started to whip them, yelling at them to chop faster. He said, "Wait until you get to Germany and they will make soap out of you". Steven was not sure but didn't believe that this could happen. The general left and they continued doing what they were doing. He was in the camp from the middle of April until June or July of 1944.

From the slave labor camp, Steven's group was taken by train back to Budapest. The group was stationed in a Jewish synagogue, where the Holocaust museum is today. The generals put straw on the floor and that's where they slept. Steven was thankful that he was at least still in Hungary. The group was subsequently relocated to a school. From the school, Steven's group went out in the morning to a different building which was like a butcher's warehouse where they froze cattle and other animals. The Germans fed on Hungarian goods. They came every day to load cattle and take it away. A supervisor one time said that Steven and his co-workers were not doing work fast enough so he locked them in one of the refrigerated storage rooms with the frozen animals. They spent about 15 minutes in the room, without winter jackets, and they started to get very cold. This did not accomplish anything but demonstrated the cruelty the Jews experienced. After 15 minutes, the supervisor realized he was not getting any productivity out of them so he let them out so they could get back to work.

One day, when Steven was coming back from the warehouse building, they went back to the school, about a half hour walk away. Steven realized there was an air raid and, lucky for them, the Americans had bombed the area and half of the school. The room where Steven used to sleep was gone. He felt so

happy when the air raid siren sounded. Even though he could have been killed in the next minute, he was so relieved to know that the danger was spread equally among Jews and non-Jews. There was an oil refinery in the area that burned for days. Steven could see the flames at night from a distance. This was in the summer of 1944.

By October 1944, Steven realized he could climb over the fence surrounding the school building, so he would leave at night, walk 5 minutes, get a street car, and go home to see his mother. Before sunrise, he would take the street car back to the school where he was stationed. Steven went back before the sergeant realized he was out and pretended nothing happened. He was able to do this a few times. He was very lucky that he was able to do this. One time, the sergeant realized this as he came back and as a punishment, he shaved Steven's head but did not inflict physical harm, so it was a relatively painless punishment.

The day before he escaped, Steven was itching from the fleas in the school and he went home to take a shower. He slept there for a few hours at night, before going back to the school. His group had been stationed in one place and on this day they were moving to another place. The head of the group was a Jewish man who wore a white arm band and Hungarian military uniform. The Germans didn't want to quarrel with the Hungarian military because they were allies. This Jewish man in the Hungarian military uniform who led the group may have saved them by slowing the Germans down. As they were moving from one location to another, they were walking with this man with the white arm band. An Arrow Cross man (equivalent of SS in Hungary) approached them and asked for identification. All of a sudden, he fired off a machine gun. The group was 75-80 people, and suddenly each of them started running in a different direction. The Arrow Cross man couldn't kill them all at once, maybe one or two. Steven ran across the plaza and went into the first open door. Two other men followed him. The three of them went into the building and closed the door. There were two staircases. Steven told them that they should split up so they wouldn't all get killed. They listened to him. The two other men stayed together and Steven separated from them. He ran up a staircase and was so desperate that he knocked on the door of a Hungarian general. The general wasn't home, which was lucky for him. Steven left the two men at the top of the staircase and walked slowly down the other staircase. By that time a police man had been posted inside the building. Steven casually said "hello" to him, the officer said "hello" back, and he just walked out. If he had known that the next day his group would be transported, Steven would have stayed at home with his mother that morning.

The following day, Steven pretended he was asleep when he heard the sergeant come in and count everyone with a flashlight. Steven knew it meant they wanted to take them away from this place and that there would be bad times ahead. They woke them up, gave them soup and told them to go to the school yard and stand two by two. Steven noticed that on the fence surrounding the school yard were young men, maybe 18 years old, from the Arrow Cross. These men were the lowest of the low. They had weapons and were very anti-Semitic. Steven saw them standing on top of the fence with machine guns while his group was standing two by two in the school yard. The sergeant gave instructions to leave the school yard and stand on the sidewalk. As soon as they walked out and started to form two lines, Steven looked back and saw that the sergeant was not visible on the street, so he took off his armband, put it in his pocket, and walked away from the group. He walked quickly, until he got to the next intersection.

Then he crossed the street, and as soon as he was out of their view, he ran until he reached the street car station and went home. The men next to him told him not to go. He knew what his choice was. If he walked away, they may realize it and shoot him from the back, but he knew he had a chance to escape and he would not face the unknown German camps. Steven thought this was the day they were taking his group to the train station to go to Germany. He took a chance by running away, but the Hungarians were not as organized as the Germans, so he knew that once he escaped they would not try to find him. Steven went home and told his mother he was there to stay. Steven later heard that they took his group to a building, lit the building on fire, and when people tried to escape, they were shot with machine guns.

Steven was back at home with his mother. They had to move away from their apartment building, as the Jews had to leave their apartments and be concentrated in the “protected” buildings in the ghetto. They had separate passports and protection from the Pope and from the Swedish. The Hungarians forced the Jews to be concentrated in certain areas so that it would be easier to transport them to Germany when the time came, but for the time being, they were protected. They stayed in their old apartment until late October 1944. They spent two to three weeks in the protected building. Then his mother came home and said there was a new law and they had to move to another building. The Jews had to be in a ghetto or a safe house. The safe house was a protected area to a degree. Sometimes you had to bribe the people guarding the safe houses, the Arrow Cross, not to allow German soldiers to come in. At the same time, the Arrow Cross killed many Jews. They took them to the Danube and killed many there. It was a matter of luck which safe house you lived.

There was a time in the fall of 1944 when Steven was walking in a square near his house with another fellow, a university student with red hair (only Jews had red hair). The student had university identification papers. Steven walked in the middle of the square by a monument depicting Hungarian military generals, which commemorated the Hungarian uprising of 1848 against the Austrian empire. Many streets converged into the square. From far away, Steven saw three men walking toward them: a policeman, a civilian, and an Arrow Cross man with an Arrow Cross arm band and a machine gun. He told his friend that the best thing to do was to walk at the same speed toward them, so they did and the three men stopped them. They asked for identification. His friend had university papers. At that time, Jews did not go to the university, as they were not allowed to attend. Steven’s paper was rudimentary but it served a purpose: it had two rubber stamps, one was square and one was round. Steven’s cousin created his paper. Because of the stamps, it looked official, and so they accepted it. Steven saw that as a miracle. This was the only time he was stopped on the street.

The last move Steven and his mother had to make was to his mother’s aunt’s (Steven’s grandmother’s sister) who kept her “exemption”. She had a retail store selling household items, like soap and cleaning products. She was allowed to keep her store until the bombardment was so bad and the Russians came to Hungary. They stayed inside the store, which had metal blinds, so they were safe inside. The store was not open for customers but they stayed there and slept in the basement for a week. It was a very cold winter but she had some warm blankets and once a day they had food so they were able to survive. There was a small stove and once a day they would warm up food. By late November 1944, the area was

no longer protected and became part of the ghetto. There was street fighting outside but no bullets came in.

One day, Steven heard strange words outside. Up until this time, they only heard Hungarian. When he heard a strange language, Steven looked out and saw Russian soldiers in white uniforms for winter with machine guns. He felt so safe.

From Steven's family – aunts, uncles, etc. – there was only one loss of life. His father was in a slave labor camp; his mother was not. One of his uncle's (his employer after he graduated from high school) had a daughter, around 12 years old, and during one of the air raids in Budapest, she went out in the street and was hit by a bullet. It could have been "friendly fire" but she was killed. It was the only loss of life in the family. After the Russians came in, Steven felt like his life was given back to him. The next day he was able to go out in the street and resume his life.

Steven left Hungary in 1956 after the Revolution. He immigrated to the United States, residing in New York and, shortly thereafter, met his wife Susanne through a mutual Hungarian friend. Susanne is also a survivor from Budapest, whose story is being recorded. Steven went back to school and got a degree in accounting, which took 12 years at night while he was working full time. Steven subsequently worked as an accountant before he retired. Susanne worked as chemist and is also an artist. They have been married for 52 years and have a grown son.